

The Grief Journey

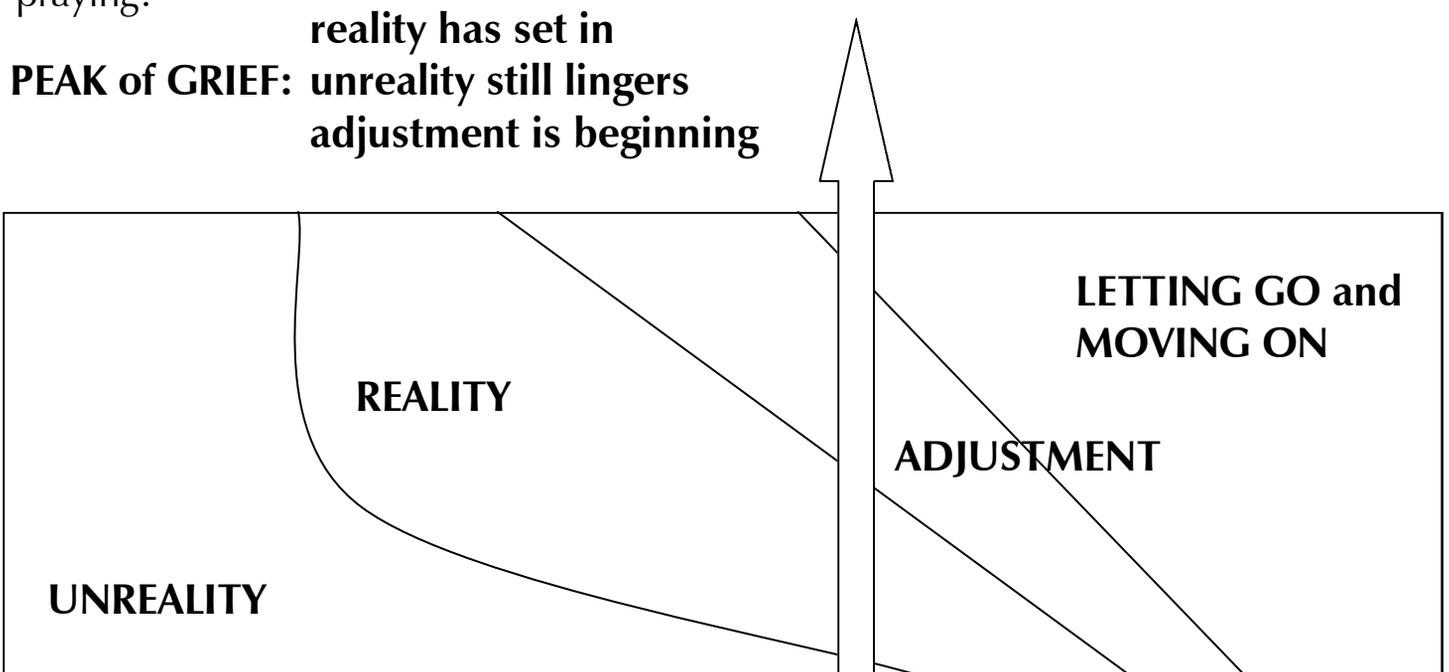
By David Flagg

“The trouble is my friends at church think I should be over it by now”

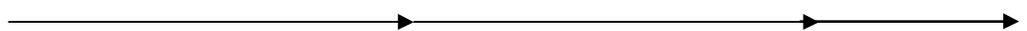
“I feel I should be able to cope”

“If only my faith were stronger I wouldn't still be like this”

It is heartfelt comments like the above that have convinced me over some years that Christians need educating about a natural and God-given process called grief. A survey of clergy (who deal regularly in this field) revealed an appalling ignorance of the bereavement process. What we need, therefore, is a more informed awareness and a greater acceptance of the grief journey. If it is natural and God-given then we cannot expect as Christians to be exempt from it. Indeed as Christians sensitive to the Holy Spirit and in touch with our God-given feelings, we shall often find ourselves more likely to experience grief or sorrow patterns. I am interpreting grief widely when I say this, because of course it is a factor in many situations of loss or pain, we well as in the death of a loved one. As we read the New Testament we find that grief is a real and expressed emotion (eg. Luke 19:41, John 11:35, Mark 14:34, Acts 20:37-38, Romans 8:26. Hebrews 5:7) Indeed tears can be a form of praying.



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But let us return to a summary of the bereavement process. The experience is different for everyone, but it has certain common factors, and indeed seems to follow a similar pattern. So the ‘stages’ of grief have often been identified

and labelled in different ways. For simplicity sake we shall see the process as a fourfold one. It is worth noting that we do not move from one stage to another at clearly defined points. As the illustration indicates, the stages give way to each other more subtly, and at times the force of a stage we thought we had got over returns with unexpected poignancy. It is also true that the journey of grief may begin before our loved one dies, if, for example, we know that they have a terminal illness. On the other hand sudden or accidental death will prolong the early stages of grief and we may find ourselves saying things like, "I don't think it has really hit me yet". The diagram suggests that there is a 'peak' of grief which, as far as I understand it, is when everything is going on at once. No one stage is completely resolved and there may be a sense of confusion, stress and tension. It is always guesswork to put this in terms of passage of time, but as a rough guide we might observe that grief 'peaks' about six months to a year after it first begins. The whole process of the diagram may take one to two years, or considerably longer in the case of losing marriage partners, parents or children. Years later the pain of sorrow may suddenly feel as real as yesterday.

UNREALITY - "I don't believe it"

When painful truth draws upon us we cannot absorb it in one go. So the early stage of grief is one of numbness, not unlike suffering from shock. People have described it as feeling "like cotton wool" and to some extent it is a kind of natural anaesthetic which wears off slowly as we begin to be able to absorb the pain.

There may be a sense that the dead person has "just gone on a long journey" from which they will soon return. There may also be a kind of euphoria which carries us through this stage and which causes others to say, "They are coping absolutely wonderfully". When this is linked with a strong Christian faith it can be regarded by onlookers as a sign that the person has overcome their grief by means of their faith. It is important for helpers to realise that the stage of apparent well-being will not last. What may last for quite a long time is the feeling deep within that "somehow I still can't believe it". This unreality theme will continue to recur at some level and at different moments through the whole grief process. A good example is the desire to share something significant with our loved ones. "When I get home", we say to ourselves, "I will tell them about this..." and then suddenly we realise they are not there to tell. This kind of experience can catch us unawares months after our bereavement began.

REALITY - "I can't bear it"

Gradually the pain of our loss and the reality of our loved one's absence becomes more and more acute. This is the stage when the grief will express itself and weeping from deep inside may feel endless. We cry and cry but we do not exhaust the grief. Rather it exhausts us, and all kinds of physical, mental and spiritual symptoms can occur.

Tiredness, dizziness, sleeplessness and a kind of “cloak” of despair may overwhelm us. Depression at this stage may be viewed as a protective cloak which we need in order to let us get on with our grieving. We may be unable to cope with the smallest of everyday demands. We may feel we are going out of our minds. Our mind is likely to feel sluggish and confused. We may forget things or forget the word we wanted to use. How important it is to be reassured that this is all perfectly normal. We are also in this stage processing our memories, sometimes playing them over and over again and often saying “if only this” or “what if that?” We can feel totally insecure, expecting others around us to be ill or die, because the secure foundations of our world have been shaken. This acute stage of grief is when we need the support of friends who will simply listen, listen without comment, strong feelings of sorrow, guilt, anger or fear. Often our anger will be directed at others, e.g.. doctors, vicars, God himself. We may find ourselves on a short fuse with little time for the needs of others. Again, it is important for our helpers to realise that we are self-absorbed and we need to be self-absorbed at this stage of the process.

ADJUSTMENT - “What can I do to handle it?”

Slowly we move towards the possibility of adjusting to our loss. The depth of our pain has been reached and we find some energy to work at how we can move forward. Still there will be times when we seem to take one step forward and ten back. Often others will notice that we are “coming through” the worst before we do. The process of adjustment may well include tying up unfinished business. Regrets, hurts, things said or not said - somehow these need to be resolved. Skilled counselling may be helpful in this phase. Prayer and ministry can move us on as the Lord heals some of the loose ends and hurt places. The gradual task of letting go begins. We need to let go of our loved one and to commit them wholeheartedly to God. All along the grief journey there are symbolic moments which may help us.

The funeral service is a letting go and a commendation of the departed, at a point in our journey when probably we are unable to enter into that process. But if we have participated in the funeral it remains there in our memory as a powerful symbol to draw upon. And there come moments when we “let the coffin go” as we may have seen it go at the service. Tasks like clearing out a bedroom or the wardrobe also help us to move on. Literally moving house can be the occasion when we turn a corner on the journey. Or we may go away perhaps to a quiet place of retreat, where God can minister to us and help us to handle some of the inner conflicts.

Anniversaries are turning points and special days too like birthdays and Christmas. Every time another one goes past we find ourselves (painfully) letting go a little more. The celebration of a Eucharist may be of great help, especially if we were not able to be at the funeral and especially too where traumatic death has occurred (accident, suicide, termination of pregnancy, miscarriage etc). In such a “Eucharist of the Resurrection” Christ dispels much of the darkness and heaviness around our loss.

MOVING ON - "I feel better but I'll never be the same again"

The length of time which it takes to come through our grief journey varies from situation to situation. And we are never the same again. It is not simply a question of getting back to normal. Something within us has died with the loved one and something also comes back to new life as we chart a new course without them. Certain pockets of our grief are likely to remain so that experiences of rejection or loss can awaken the pain. It remains a vulnerable area. We shall need some insight into the ways aspects of our grief are unresolved. We may well need skilled help even years after a bereavement.

HELP ON THE JOURNEY

What help do we need?

- We need the permission to grieve.
- We need the awareness that grieving is natural and that Christians are not exempt from it.
- We need a gentleness on ourselves and a gentleness from others.
- We need others to understand that time often stands still for us. The painful loss is as real as it were yesterday, especially when we are at the peak of our grief.
- We need others to listen to us without over-reacting.
- We need to be able to repeat ourselves until we have got the acuteness of the pain out of our system.
- We need people who understand and accept that living with a bereaved person is hard work.

Our ultimate help is in God himself. But the pain of the whole process may include the sense of His absence. Prayer may be dry or difficult. We do not necessarily experience the "uplifting" that some people know through the prayers of others. It may be a long time before the light and love and faith blossom again in our hearts.

CONCLUSION

My hope and my prayer is that in understanding something of the bereavement process we may ourselves find some light on the path and be more able to stand alongside others in their experiences of loss. We may even be able to say "Thanks be to God for creating grief".